

## Self-Regulation Techniques

Compiled by Deanna Iris Sava, MS, OTR/L

Thanks to the occupational therapists on the American Occupational Therapy Association's school and sensory integration listservs, members of the ot-peds listserv, and a professional who specializes in autism for submitting these ideas.

1. Isometric exercises. Any kind of isometrics offer a lot of proprioceptive (muscle) input. Some examples of isometric exercises are:
  - pushing hands together (use the cues "hands together, elbows up, push push push, relax)
  - hooking fingers together (one arm palm down, the other palm up) and have child pull fingers apart while hooked together
  - giving child a bear hug while he/she tries to pull your arms away
  - chair push-ups
  - deep breathing
  
2. Here are two suggestions:
  - I think a good weighted vest or pressure vest (e.g. Bear Hug) under his clothes would be the BEST option (a parent and two other therapists suggested this as well)
  - also, social stories or cartoon strips on preferred behavior in public places has worked well with my kids
  
3. Blow out five candles to teach deep breathing. To teach this, hold up your hand with fingers spread. Blow on each finger, one at a time, as if blowing out birthday candles. When the child learns this concept, you can simply say, "Blow out candles" and hold up your hand.
  
4. A thought that pops to mind is a technique I use for kids who respond well to deep pressure:
  - grasp hands together and give self deep pressure to top of head so it goes down the neck and spine. It can be done sitting or standing
  - child can also shrug shoulders to cover ears (as to protect from noise)
  - can have child count or blow or take deep breaths, depending on what works for them. I think the inward pressure gives a sense of literally imposing control on oneself. I frequently do hand over hand with the preschoolers (and older students who respond to pressure through the head)
  
5. Some of the following strategies might be good for preventing anxiety:
  - have the caregiver use sensory strategies before the boy child enters a new environment

## Self-Regulation Techniques

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Page Two

- warning the child verbally as well as through the use of whatever communication system he uses that there will be unexpected noises and events in the environment he is about to enter can also be helpful
- perhaps he/she could benefit from using a social stories approach for this. Many children with autism understand more than they are able to express they can understand, so using verbally-based strategies can often prevent behaviors

Once the child has lost control, however, these strategies are much less likely to be effective.

6. I would suggest:
  - have him listen to a CD with headphones at a volume level that is already set to drown out or account for any sudden noise (note: drum or other bass music should not be used with headphones)
  - give him a structured task so his focus is off-set during certain times of the day, in certain stores or restaurants, etc.
7. I successfully used some of the breathing exercises from the book The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook with an older student. We made a videotape of his mother reading the "scripts" - I was the model for the actual breathing exercises. The resource teacher ran the video camera. We did this in a one-hour session at the end of the day. There was good use and follow up from this video. The student learned the techniques and was able to use them when he started to become agitated for whatever reason. We emphasized the "control" aspect of it because he loves to be in control of things and this made sense to him.
8. The Alert Program, 'How Does Your Engine Run?' is a program for self-regulation by Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger. It provides a vocabulary and a great variety of practical calming and organizing activity ideas that are appropriate for many different situations. It also helps create awareness in the child to his/her needs and what he/she can do to control him/herself and the environment (2 respondents suggested this).
9. Try using systematic desensitization techniques. Start with prompting the child in a safe environment before a startling noise is going to occur, then progress in that safe environment to more startling stimuli. Just use equipment and techniques that would be available to the child in his/her natural environment. Then you could progress to more challenging situations, going back to prompting him/her before the event and moving to more challenging stimuli.
10. You might try some "brain gym" activities. The 'hook-ups' are indicated to be self-calming, and would not be too noticeable in public.

## Self-Regulation Techniques

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Page Three

11. These might have limited application in the community:
- if an escalator is around and not busy, he can be very mesmerizing and hard work to try to keep your hands on the escalator rails as it travels down (very rhythmical) or try to go up a down escalator - although safety is a concern depending on the child and surroundings
  - dressing rooms or rest rooms also provide a nice escape area
  - another thought is to provide a game boy as a distraction for the duration of the trip
  - and of course, all the preventative measures such as such as deep pressure and fidget activities prior to going out and while in the car
  - headphones, ear muffs, or a tight hat during winter may also help cut down the noise distraction and provide input

### **BOOKS:**

There is a book for adults and children with disabilities called RELAXATION: A Comprehensive Manual for Adults, Children, and Children with Special Needs by Joseph R. Cautela and June Groden, Research Press Company. It was recommended by a behavior specialist who works with children with autism. Clenching and relaxing the fist is one of the exercises.

There are a number of deep breathing exercises in the book The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook by Martha Davis, Matthew McKay, PhD, and Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman. It's available through Amazon.com.

Sensory Comfort (800-436-2622) has several books that might be helpful. Two of them look like they relate to dealing with stress and making smooth transitions:

- Relationship Development Intervention with Young Children (for Asperger Syndrome, Autism, PDD and NLD) by Steven E. Gutstein and Rachelle K. Sheely.
- Navigating the Social World by Jeanette McAfee.